

Carrying the Confucian Torch to the Masses: The Challenge of Structuring the Confucian Revival in the People's Republic of China*

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Over a period of thirty years, China's relation to its "cultural tradition" or "traditional culture" evolved dramatically. Whereas it was still largely considered negatively in the 1980s, things gradually changed in the 1990s, especially in scholarly circles that became increasingly interested in "national studies".¹ In that context, the works of contemporary Confucian scholars from the Republican era or writing, after 1949, from the "periphery" (Taiwan, Hong Kong or the United States) started to be "critically studied".² Thus, to a large extent, the "return" of Confucianism in Mainland China after the iconoclastic Maoist episode took primarily the form of intellectual enterprises, and particularly of philosophical projects often of the most speculative kind.³ At the same time, however, the progressive broadening of the population's "space of experience" translated into a related enlargement of its "horizon of expectation"⁴ and in so doing facilitated the return of a reference to Confucianism within the "space of the people." After a quick introduction about the so-called popular "Confucian revival" that took place in Chinese society in the 2000s and that was characterized by the high fragmentation of a patchwork of extremely different activities, the article discusses the possibility of structuring a religious Confucianism. For that purpose, two cases are explored: Firstly, the reactivated dream of establishing a Confucian church; secondly, the possible return in Mainland China of Confucianism-inspired "redemptive societies" and *jiaohua* organizations.

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1 Thoraval 1989 and 1990.

2 In Western languages, see Makeham 2003 and 2008; Bresciani 2001; Lee and Moritz 2001.

3 There are a few exceptions, however, an example of which is the creation of the Academy of Chinese Culture (*Zhonghua wenhua shuyuan* 中華文化書院) in Beijing in the 1980s. This academy, opened by professors from Peking University, had a clear "*minjian*" orientation (disseminating *guoxue* in society).

4 Koselleck 1989a.

Popular Confucianism in the 2000s: A Patchwork of Scattered and Fragmented Activities

In its popular dimension, the “Confucian revival” of the first decade of the new century was a highly fragmented and scattered phenomenon. Fragmented, because the reference to Confucianism translated into a patchwork of different and non-coordinated initiatives (educative, “religious”, cultural, patrimonial, commercial, political etc.) carried out by people stemming from all classes of society. Scattered, because these phenomena burgeoned everywhere throughout the PRC’s territory. The consequence of these two characteristics is that the so-called “Confucian revival” was definitely not an integrated social movement.⁵ The question we will be addressing afterwards is whether it could become one.

Taking the risk of oversimplification, it can be convenient, in order to briefly introduce the Confucianism-related events that developed during the 2000s, to distinguish between three ideal-types of motivations frequently encountered in the ranks of promoters of Confucianism and, therefore, instrumental in the production of all sorts of “Confucianism-related activities”. By “promoters of Confucianism”, I mean people “carrying the Confucian torch to the masses”, whatever their ultimate goals may be, and not about the millions of people who participated in some way or another (for example by reading the Classics) to the range of these Confucianism-related activities. Not surprisingly, these three types of motivations are: (a) adhesion to some elements of the “Confucian worldview”, whatever these elements may be⁶

5 The category of “social movement” is itself problematic since it is often used in analysis based on a state – society opposition. Considering the extent to which the “Confucian revival” is intertwined with state structures (Confucian activists are often employed by state structures and promote their cause from the inside), this dichotomy does not make sense in our context. If the Confucian revival is to turn into an integrated social movement, which is not yet the case, this will not be done in opposition to the state. I understand therefore “social movement” in the same way Palmer defines it in the case of the Qigong movement. See Palmer 2009a.

6 I take this idea of “adhesion” in the broadest sense. I am not defining any criterion about what it actually is and even less about what it should be. As long as the activists identify, rightly or wrongly, some elements that they associate with Confucianism (and even if they do not associate these elements only with Confucianism) and as long as their action is driven by the conviction that the said elements are valuable and need to be promoted in society I consider that the form of motivation is linked to “adhesion”. Of course, the limit of such a categorization is that you can encompass in the category labelled “adhesion” people with completely different, if not largely opposed, worldviews. This is obviously due to the problem of defining Confucianism, to the diversity of the intellectual traditions and practices that it encompasses and to its long and tumultuous history, for example as an imperial ideology. However, for our purpose in that paper, I do not think

and even if such an adhesion is not exclusive; (b) the power of the *renminbi*, i. e. material motivation; (c) political motivation. Of course these three motivations are themselves complex (e. g., political motivation can be central or local, linked to economic imperatives or ideological instructions etc.) and, moreover, they are primarily ideal-types. As a result, several motivations may drive the behaviour of a given activist. Besides, if we consider the situation no longer from the perspective of the behavioural psychology of a single activist but from the perspective of a given Confucianism-related activity taking place in society, the latter can of course also result from a set of completely different motivations linked to the variety of actors involved in the process. I will now provide a few examples of cases where the “adhesion”, economic or political motivations are respectively prevailing. These examples in no way constitute a comprehensive typology of any kind. However, they are real cases studied in the course of field research and therefore provide some insight into the complexity of a variety of phenomena burgeoning in the 2000s.

A first ideal-type, the adhesion to a newly discovered Confucian set of values can be the driving force behind the implementation of Confucian activities. In Qufu, Shandong province, groups of *minjian* (popular) activists gather each year in order to celebrate the birth of Confucius far from the officially sponsored festival. United technically through the Internet and spiritually by what H. Tillman terms, in another context, a ‘fellowship of the way’,⁷ these ‘believers’ – they themselves use the words *xinyangzhe* – engage in ritual activities imbued with a real religious dimension. Obligated to ascribe some degree of institutionalization to their activities, they have to comply with the agenda of local authorities but they do it in a way that is not unambiguous.⁸ Grassroots initiatives may also dwell in more concrete structures than the virtual spheres of the internet or episodic activities carried out in temples and adhesion to Confucianism develops for instance in all kinds of *danwei*. A research carried out in Shenzhen explores the case of a restaurant owner proselytizing in her premises.⁹ It provides an insight into how one converts to Confucianism and afterwards turns into a vigorous promoter of the Confucian Dao. Salvation and redemption from a polluted society are in this case the “horizon of expectation” of this form of activism. The same city of Shenzhen offers another striking example about how Confucian faith /

that the limitations associated with the use of “adhesion” as a category are problematic ones.

- 7 Tillman 1992, 2–4. I borrow the expression that H. Tillman originally used in a Song dynasty context.
- 8 Billioud and Thoraval 2009b. We speak about a “strategic equivocality” in order, for example, to characterize the behaviour of activists obliged to negotiate with the authorities a space for their activities. However, this equivocality also exists on the side of the authorities.
- 9 Billioud and Thoraval 2008.

adhesion to Confucianism translates into large-scale proselytising activities. Mr. X is a Confucian-businessman (*rushang* 儒商), a term recently reactivated to characterize a group of people eager to apply a Confucian ethics in their business practice and in the management of their companies. He explains himself that in the expression *ru shang*, “*ru*” may be grammatically ascribed a verbal function. The expression can therefore be translated by “confucianizing (i. e., moralizing) business”.¹⁰ What are the modalities of such a “confucianization”? In his specific case, Mr. X actively promotes Confucian ethics and Classics readings within his group of companies specialized in the field of education. Altogether, around 1000 employees are somehow involved in these activities.¹¹ To some extent, Mr. X’s adhesion to Confucianism is driven by the feeling shared by an increasing number of successful business people that the “economic elite” has a social responsibility and that such a responsibility goes beyond the pure economic realm.¹² A last example studied by Ji Zhe complements this list of very different cases sharing one common feature: a prevalent – though not necessarily exclusive – ideal type of “adhesion to Confucian values”. In Xi’an, it is an organization focusing on the promotion of traditional music that attempts by the same token to promote an ethical and esthetical type of Confucian education that is reinvented into an “apolitical art”. The organization promotes both a children initiation to classical music and “self-cultivation” among university students. Its expansion is facilitated both by governmental support (the program of initiation to classical music was part of the 10th five-year plan) and economically by the successful sales of CD boxes.¹³

This last remark provides an easy transition to our second ideal type driving the Confucian revival: the power of the *renminbi*, i. e. material motivation. This dimension has been especially emphasized by a number of commentators critical of the movement, be they hostile to Confucianism or, to the contrary, sympathetic with a cause that they would prefer to see prevailing in a more disinterested way. However, there is nothing really surprising about this association between money and faith. Anyone going to Lourdes, in the south of France, at the time of the Catholic pilgrimage, notices the extreme merchandising of religion, a phenomenon which is indeed banal and that does not prevent pilgrims to live their faith sincerely. Examples could be easily multiplied. The same logic largely applies in China within the context of the “Confucian revival”. A good example is given by the case of a company that promotes actively the Confucian Classics in society in a highly successful way. As a business en-

10 Interview, December 2006.

11 Interview, December 2006.

12 We have conducted a number of interviews in Zhuhai (2006) and Beijing (2005, 2007) with Confucian entrepreneurs. The sense of a responsibility towards society was a recurrent theme associated with their interest in Confucianism (or *guoxue*) and the desire to promote Classics reading within their company.

13 Zhe 2008.

terprise, the company is flourishing and, even though its management claims that it would have willingly adopted a non-profit structure,¹⁴ it leaves little doubt that it can also live with profits... This being said, this business segment has not been chosen haphazardly and managers-activists seem to skillfully combine a sense of their material interests with a real and sincere adhesion to Confucian values. A good example of the latter point lies in the self-cultivation practices (i. e. regular Classics reading sessions) that are carried out by company employees within the framework of their organization. Financial interests also constitute a motivation behind the multiplication of vulgarization works on Confucius and the *Analects* offered to the public. The “Yu Dan case” is well-known and does not demand much comment. Let us just recall that Yu Dan, a charismatic young woman and professor in media studies, created an immensely successful program on the *Analects* of Confucius that was broadcasted on CCTV. A book based on the program sold millions of copies and stirred up both fierce debates and much envy. The writer of these lines vividly remembers a car journey with Confucian activists employed in universities discussing for hours, very much like marketing strategists, the best means to collect the golden eggs of the Confucian hen...¹⁵ Material interests associated with the Confucian revival are not necessarily only orientated towards personal profits and may also take the form of economic interests favoured by local governments, for example in order to develop the tourist industry, generate new investments, enhance the general attractiveness of a geographical area etc. These factors need to be taken into account for example when one analyzes the return of high-profile celebrations of tutelary figures of Chinese civilization: Confucius in Qufu (Shandong), Yu the Great in Shaoxing (Zhejiang), Huangdi in Huangling (Shaanxi) etc.¹⁶

This brings us to our third ideal-type, namely the political factor. In its purest and somehow caricatural form, such an ideal-type refers to an instrumental promotion of Confucianism (at the central or local levels) for ideological and control purposes. At a central level, Anne-Marie Brady studied for instance the use of Confucian references in the propaganda apparatus.¹⁷ One can also emphasize the importance now ascribed to Confucianism or “traditional culture” in the curriculum of the central party school.¹⁸ But once more, it is very difficult to speak simply in terms of instrumentalisation, since a set of intertwined motivations needs to be taken into account when analyzing such a phenomenon. People sympathetic with Confucianism at the party school obviously do not see their endeavours to promote it as something simply instrumental. They also believe in the virtues of what they do: “adhesion” and “politi-

14 Field observation, Beijing, June 2006.

15 Field observation, 2007, on the roads of Hebei province,

16 On Huangdi see Billeter 2007; on Confucius in Qufu, see Billioud and Thoraval 2009b.

17 Brady 2009.

18 Field observation, Beijing, March 2009.

cal” motivations are therefore hard to distinguish. At a local level, political motivation of people promoting Confucianism is also often inseparable from other sets of motivations. The project (supported by the central authorities in spite of a fierce polemic) of creating a “symbolic city of Chinese culture” (*Zhonghua wenhua biaozi cheng* 中華文化標誌城), if not a “cultural vice-capital” (*wenhua fudu* 文化副都) in the Qufu – Zoucheng – Jiulongshan (Shandong) area is the result of a combination of factors: political (or cultural politics: celebration of chineseness etc.), economic (tourism) and probably as well the belief in Confucianism from people within the power apparatus.¹⁹ Just as complex is the case of the Lujiang cultural education center studied by G. Dutournier and Ji Zhe. Located in Tangchi (Anhui province), the center, opened by the Buddhist monk Jingkong, trains ardent promoters of a “harmonious society” based on moralisation techniques and the study of the *Dizi gui* (a Confucian classical text entitled the *Rules of the disciple*). This enterprise, described by the authors as supportive of a single-party political model relying on a careful selection of elites also supports the local official objectives of enhancement of the district. Adhesion to a form of ‘governmentality’ based on technologies of the self and domination of others echoes to a large extent the existing non-liberal political model.²⁰

In sum, the forms of “Confucianism” or Confucianism-inspired activities that proliferated in the 2000s are manifold, complex and more often than not promoted by actors sharing a variety of different motivations. If we consider large-scale activities, it is often the combination, in extents that may vary, of ‘adhesion’, economic ambitions and political objectives that enabled the implementation of ‘*huodong*’ that would otherwise not have taken place. In any case, the revival of “Confucianism” remained a totally fragmented and more often than not very local phenomenon (even though local resurgence of “Confucianism” took place nationwide). The question that one now needs to raise is to which extent the coming years might bring something larger in scope and more integrated. The following sections of this paper will address this issue by focusing on one specific but central aspect of this “Confucian revival”: its religious dimension. Of course, the very concept of “religion” and its imported background raise a number of well-known difficulties in the context of Confucianism. Indeed, numerous scholars have discussed the issue for now more than one hundred years and engaging in depth into that discussion is largely beyond the ambition of the current paper.²¹ In any case, I am using here the word “religion” as what the Buddhists term a *fangbian* (*upāya*), or, in other words, something provisory posited for the sake of a demonstration but only true to some limited degree.

19 Billioud and Thoraval 2009b, 86–87.

20 Dutournier and Zhe 2009, 75–76.

21 For a well-documented synthesis of the debates that took place since 1978 on this issue, see Makeham 2008, especially chapter 13. See also Sun 2005 and 2007.

Two issues will be discussed in the following sections: The dream of a unified Confucian church and the issue of redemptive societies and *jiaohua* 教化 agencies.

The Dream of a Unified Confucian Church

The dream of carrying the Confucian torch to the people through an institutionalized religion ambiguously inspired both by Western modernity (i. e. the Western modern religious model considered a must for building a modern nation-state) and the nostalgia of a *guojiao* (national teaching) is not new. After a few very brief historical considerations, I will introduce an example of a concrete realization in Hong Kong. Finally, the emphasis will be put on one of the latest developments taking place at the beginning of the 2010s in Mainland China.

The issue of a Confucian religion – and more generally of the possible institutionalization of Confucianism – became especially acute with the demise of the empire. Some of the advocates of Confucianism found that its organization under the Christianity-inspired church model was a good option. This was the case of one of the disciples of Kang Youwei, Chen Huanzhang 陳煥章. In 1912, a “Confucian religion association” (*kongjiao hui* 孔教會) was founded. It developed quickly in the first years of the Republic (132 branches countrywide) and constituted one of the most original attempts to ascribe a new institutional, symbolical and popular framework to a Confucianism gradually dissociated from the system. From 1913 to 1916, an important debate took place about whether Confucian religion (*kongjiao* 孔教) should become a state religion (*guojiao* 國教) and as such inscribed in the constitution, which finally did not occur.²²

From the 1920's, China entered into a period of anti-religious campaigns whereas another imported concept, i. e. science, played a pivotal role. Gradually, even within Confucian circles, the idea of a religious institutionalization of Confucianism lost ground. The word *kongjiao* was step by step replaced by terms like *rujia* and *ruxue* and another imported category, philosophy, associated with all the prestige of science, began to be more and more influential. From that period onwards, the institutional fate of Confucianism began to be increasingly associated with university (philosophy) departments. This being said, one also needs to nuance this extremely basic presentation of the situation and emphasize two other trends: Firstly, a number of ideological projects also attempted to make an instrumental use of Confucianism (e. g., the Japanese in Manchukuo or the New Life Movement); Secondly, Confucianism was also referred to – though generally not exclusively –

22 On this topic, see Chen 1999; Zufferey 2007; Gossaert 2007. Gan 2007a, 75–76. This paragraph and the one following are inspired by Billioud and Thoraval 2008, 100–103.

by the many “redemptive societies” that proliferated during the Republican era and to which we will come back later.

Around 1930, the Kongjiaohui no longer attracted new elites and Chen Huanzhang went to Hong Kong where his enterprise developed in a way which has an increasing impact nowadays.

Hong Kong indeed offers a very interesting case for promoters of a “Confucian church” in that Confucianism is considered one of the six major religions in the Special Administrative Region. It is represented through an official body, the Confucian Academy (*kongjiao xueyuan* 孔教學院), that is the direct heir of Chen Huanzhang’s Kongjiaohui.²³ In Hong Kong, the Confucian Academy is involved in a variety of different fields: charities, education (it controls several primary, middle and high schools), politics (every religion nominates a fixed number of representatives to the committee electing the Chief Executive of Hong Kong), academic work and rituals. Under the leadership of its leader, Tang Enjia 湯恩佳, who presents himself as a *rushang*/Confucian entrepreneur (he originally made a fortune with a business in industrial paintings)²⁴, the Academy organizes large ritual ceremonies in honour of Confucius. In 2007, for the first time, ceremonies were performed in Hong Kong’s main stadium in the presence of representatives from all the other major religions. The impact of the Confucian Academy on the Hong Kong population remains probably very limited compared to the one of Buddhism, Daoism or popular religion (e. g., the Tianhou cult) and it is largely associated with its educative enterprises (numerous pupils of schools monitored by the Academy always attend the Academy’s “popular activities”) and, in a more indirect way, with the power and influence it is institutionally granted.

Apart from its operations in Hong Kong, the Academy, endowed with significant financial resources, is very much involved in the promotion of Confucianism on the Mainland: renovation of Confucius temples, raising massive statues of Confucius (1200 of them have already been raised across the country), support given to academic projects etc. Behind all these activities, the Academy highlights its four main targets: (1) Obtaining the status of religion for Confucianism in Mainland China. (2) Creating national bank holidays to celebrate Confucius’ birthday. These days off would provide the opportunity to organize large ritual ceremonies everywhere. (3) Introducing some Confucian teaching in the schools’ curricula. (4) Creating in all the cities, small or big, some kind of “churches of the Sage” (*Kongsheng jiaotang* 孔聖教堂) or youth associations for the promotion of Confucian religion (*Kongjiao qingnian hui* 孔教青年) with the objective of enabling Confucianism to gradually re-enter daily life. All these targets have many similarities with what was

23 On the Confucian academy, see Li 2000.

24 Interview, Hong Kong, December 2008.

already promoted by the Kongjiaohui in the 1910s and 1920s. It is interesting as well to stress that political benefits of these different measures are highlighted in a number of documents issued by the Confucian Academy: Confucian religion is presented as being able to “strengthen national unity and cohesion” (*qianghua minzu de tuanjie yu ningjuli* 強化民族的團結與凝聚力); days off will provide the opportunity “to reflect upon the culture of our country”. “Confucian teaching” would embody a necessary “spiritual civilization” which complements the material one etc. We here touch the issue of the theologico-political nature of the power in China.

Very recent developments of which the Confucian academy is also a part are nowadays taking place in Mainland China centered around the idea of reactivating Chen Huanzhang’s ideal of a Confucian religion. One of the most striking examples of these developments is the creation, in Shenzhen in 2009, of a “Hall of the Sage Confucius” or *Kongsheng Tang* 孔聖堂, a structure that aims at providing a religious space for the revival of religious Confucianism.²⁵ As will be explained below, the structure is not thought of as an isolated local undertaking but as a model supposed to expand quickly in the years ahead.

The premises of Shenzhen’s Hall of the Sage Confucius are located within the Donghu park, in a middle-sized building that was inaugurated during the Summer 2009. The Shenzhen Kongsheng Tang is presented as the new prototype of the place of cult (*daochang* 道場) for a Confucian religion in tune with the modern era. It is composed of a main large room with an altar (featuring an image of the Sage and an incense burner) that is mainly used for rituals and music, readings, courses and musical sessions. Other parts include office and meeting spaces as well as a room displaying classical music instruments and used for musical practice. Outside of the premises proper and at the entrance of the park stands a massive statue of Confucius donated by the leader of the Hong Kong Confucian Academy, Tang Enjia, and by the members of the International Group of companies Sanhe. It is besides this statue that big events take place such as the cult of Confucius celebrated here for the first time in Shenzhen or the recent ceremony to honour Chen Huanzhang. Under its present form, the Shenzhen Kongsheng Tang is officially registered as a NGO under another structure itself located in Qufu.²⁶ It currently employs 4 people and around 30 others are very much involved in organizations of events. Even though the structure is only a few months old, I have been told that around 3000 people already take part in its activities on a regular basis.²⁷ Before introducing the activities, development model and future

25 I provide here a few introductory elements of an ongoing research.

26 The *Qufu rujia wenhua lianbehui* 曲阜儒家文化聯合會 of which Shenzhen’s Kongsheng Tang director, Mr. Zhou Beichen, is also the director.

27 Interview with Mr. Zhou, Shenzhen, January 2010. Figures need obviously to be taken cautiously.

prospects of the Kongsheng Tang, let us add a few words on its leader (*tangzhu* 堂主), Mr. Zhou Beichen (周北辰).

Born in 1965 in Guizhou province, Mr. Zhou is the mastermind behind the Kongsheng Tang project. After graduating from Guizhou normal university, he engaged in a range of various activities, from business to journalism, publishing and teaching. As far as his personal interests and aspirations were concerned, an initial phase of curiosity towards things Western (especially philosophy) was followed at the beginning of the 1990s by the discovery of the work of contemporary new Confucian thinkers that were introduced at that time in Mainland China.²⁸ It was also during that period that he read the work by Jiang Qing 蔣慶 – a well-known Confucian scholar and social activist – dedicated to the Gongyang school of Confucianism (*gongyangxue* 公羊學)²⁹ and Mr. Zhou was immediately attracted by a thought that was addressing directly political (*waiwang* 外王) issues. This reading provided the opportunity of an encounter with Jiang Qing himself that changed Mr. Zhou's life and was decisive for what we could term his "conversion to Confucianism". After a number of exchanges, the relations between the two men deepened and, in 1996, Zhou Beichen founded with Jiang Qing the Yangming Jingshe, a classical academy located in the Guizhou mountains.³⁰ From 1996 to 2003, Zhou lived in the academy with the one who became his Master.³¹ This case is striking in that we have here a situation of a contemporary Confucian activist actually trained in the PRC in an extremely classical Master-disciple way over a long period of time. It is not possible here to discuss this issue in depth. Let us just emphasize that this case raises the question of the role that "revisited" traditional institutions could play in contemporary society, a question that probably also requires to re-read the history of the dismantlement of classical institutions in the Republican era.³² After 2003, Zhou Beichen settled down in Shenzhen. He was involved in some business activities in order to make a living while reflecting upon the best way to carry the Confucian torch to the people. It was during that transitional period that he gradually designed the project of creating a Kongsheng Tang to which he now dedicates his whole energy.

28 On the topic see for example in English: Makeham 2003. Bresciani 2001.

29 On the Gongyang tradition see Cheng 1985. Jiang Qing's reference works on the Gongyang school is Jiang 1995. For an introduction in English to Jiang Qing's ideas see Bell 2008. Some reflections on the current interest for the Gongyang tradition can be found in Billioud and Thoraval 2009a and Jiang Qing 2009.

30 D. Bell, who went to the Yangming jingshe, explains that its "aim is to educate a community of friends and scholars in the Confucian Classics and to plant the seeds of political Confucianism. They read Classic texts in the morning, discuss in the afternoon and sing together in the evening". Bell 2008, 188–189.

31 Jiang Qing was himself sharing his time between Shenzhen and Guizhou.

32 Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 6–7.

Kang Youwei, the famous Confucian scholar of the end of the Qing dynasty, had two famous disciples: Liang Qichao and Chen Huanzhang. About the first one, who chose the way of political commitment to promote his ideas, Zhou tells that he somehow betrayed his Master, a fact that could be seen by considering the influence he exerted on the May 4th Movement. It is the second disciple, Chen Huanzhang, who really perpetuated Kang Youwei's ideals with a project of religious reform. And this religious reform (*zongjiao gaige* 宗教改革), Zhou asserts, is still expected today.³³ The emphasis constantly put on the idea of reform in his discourse is very much in the vein of the Gongyang tradition inherited by Kang Youwei. In the present case, the core of this expected religious reform is a combination of unification and pluralism (*yitong duoyuan* 一統多元). Pluralism, because people should be given the choice to practice the religion they believe in. Unification, because China has a “mainstream tradition” (*zhuliu chuantong* 主流傳統), namely the Confucian tradition, considered the “spiritual abode” (*jingshen jiyuan* 精神家園) of all Chinese people.³⁴ Therefore, Zhou believes – and he is thus echoing a number of other prominent Confucian activists – that Confucianism should be enhanced and promoted to the status of national religion (*guojiao* 國教).³⁵ In his opinion, there is no incompatibility between freedom of faith and the establishment of a national religion.³⁶ Furthermore, he posits that a national religion does not necessarily boil down to returning to a past situation characterized by the “union of the political and the religious” (*zheng jiao he yi*: 政教合一) and proposes instead a new formula: “an integration of governance and teaching”³⁷ with a separation of powers between the sacred and the secular” (*zhi jiao yi ti, shen su fen quan* 治教一體, 聖俗分權). Within such a framework, the “holy king”, i.e. the Confucian “church”, would dispose of the “power to educate and transform people” (*shengwang* 聖王領教權) whereas the “secular king”, i.e. the authorities³⁸, would dispose of the “power to rule people” (*suwang ling zhiquan* 俗王領治權).³⁹ There is no room here for a detailed discussion. Suffice it to emphasize that when Zhou says that there is no need to return to a situation characterized by the “union of the political and the religious” we should not understand this statement as a plea in favour of a Western style modernity (which would to a large extent be in contradiction with the idea of “an integration of governance and teaching”). In fact, Zhou Beichen, in the same way as his Master

33 Interview, Shenzhen, January 2010.

34 Interview, Shenzhen, January 2010.

35 Another well-known promoter of Confucianism as a state religion is Renmin University professor Kang Xiaoguang. See Ownby 2009.

36 These ideas are clearly explained in Zhou 2009, 133.

37 *Jiao* in that sentence refers to the idea of *jiaohua* 教化: education/transformation.

38 Government and party (be it a Communist Party or a Confucian Party. I refer here to all the debates about the Confucianization/*rujiahua* of the CCP). See Billioud 2007, 60–62.

39 Zhou 2009, 135.

Jiang Qing and a number of Confucian revivalists (but not all of them), opposes, at least to a large extent, Western modernity.⁴⁰ Or, to be more precise, it seems to me that Zhou has a selective appropriation of Western modernity if we understand the latter in a sociological way, as a “differentiation process” (differentiation of values, differentiation of tasks). Whereas he refuses a real plurality in the realm of values – indeed, the limits of his conception of freedom of faith is probably that it needs to remain compatible with the values of a national religion⁴¹ –, he accepts a certain modern separation of tasks: The authorities rule the country, the national religion *jiaohua* (educates and transforms) the people. Obviously, the theologico-political nature of power remains a prevailing dimension of such a scheme.

In any case, Confucianism is not at the moment in China one of the five official religions and even less a national one (*guojiao*). The Kongsheng Tang model designed and still tested by Zhou is, in that context, the transitory tool that could give birth when time comes (and provided that it comes) to a national organization supported by the State. In the meantime, the Kongsheng Tang faces a double problem: How to institutionalize the Confucian “religious activities” of a non-recognized Confucian religion? How to design a sustainable development model since the Kongsheng Tang has been thought of as a structure with nationwide ambitions? Due to the novelty of the organization, time and additional research will be necessary to answer these questions. Let us simply mention here that the Kongsheng Tang is very well integrated in the city of Shenzhen. Officials participate to its activities in the same way they participate, in a very different context, to the activities of Hong Kong’s Confucian academy.⁴² The Head the State Administration of Religious Affairs’ newly created division in charge of following popular faith and “new religions” attended for instance the 2009 ceremonies to honour Confucius and spoke highly of the organization. In brief, despite its somehow ambiguous NGO status, it does not seem to encounter at the moment any problem whatsoever to carry out its openly religious activities. The second issue is the one of the development model of the Kongsheng Tang. The existing situation is in fact at the moment transitory since the organization benefited for this first location (or, second location after Qufu which is another case), of the financial support from both Hong Kong’s Confucian academy and the Sanhe group of companies whose CEO (also a high

40 See Jiang 2009, 104, footnote 4.

41 This raises the question of what would be authorized or not authorized in such a system. Would it reintroduce an orthodoxy – heterodoxy paradigm?

42 This of course raises questions about the capacity in which officials take part to these activities. Observing participation is of course not synonymous with adhesion. Whereas some officials only participate to Confucian activities in the framework of their monitoring mission, one can also emphasize that one of the characteristics of the current “Confucian revival” is that many activists are also employed by government structures.

dignitary of the Hong Kong Confucian academy) embraces the Confucian cause. It is at the moment the Sanhe group that pays the salaries of the permanent staff.⁴³ Financial resources being the precondition of any expansion, Zhou Beichen has designed a “sustainable model” (*ziyang moshi* 滋養模式), still under test: the idea is to promote a certain number of activities likely to generate some incomes and finance the development of the organization. The core activities would be ritualism (for example Confucian wedding ceremonies, funerals etc.) and education/training carried out within companies in order to promote “the construction of a Confucian entrepreneurs corporate culture” (*rushang qiye wenhua jianshe*).⁴⁴ This being said, this economic model and lucrative activities are in no case sufficient to characterize what is now called the “Shenzhen model” (深圳模式) of revival of Confucian culture.⁴⁵ Lots of the activities carried out by the organisation (a number of collective rituals⁴⁶, texts reading sessions in the Kongsheng Tang, musical practice etc) are opened to the public without any fee. The development of economic activities – as for most religions – responds to very practical needs but the ultimate goal remains the promotion of Confucianism, not the quest for profits.⁴⁷ The Kongsheng Tang is at the moment only at a starting phase of its activities and time will be necessary to understand how it develops and whether it succeeds in training a “Confucian clergy”, in opening new *daochang* (20 to 30 of them are planned in the few coming years) and in carrying out other projects that now only exist on the paper (inauguration, in Shenzhen, of a “sacred Chinese mountain” or *zhonghua shengshan* 中華聖山; Creation of some sort of seminary or *rujiao daxue* 儒教大學 etc.). In any case, we already have here a striking example of a concrete undertaking that aims at realizing Chen Huanzhang’s dream of establishing a Confucian church. But other attempts also took place at the end of the empire and during the Republican era in order to

43 Interview, Shenzhen, January 2010. I am not clear about whether salaries are paid by the company or by the CEO himself.

44 These points are studied in an ongoing research.

45 See for example “Chuangli minzu chuantong wenhua fuxing de Shenzhen moshi” 創立民族傳統文化復興的深圳模式 (Creating a Shenzhen Model of Renaissance of Traditional and National Culture), *Shenzhen shangbao*, 13 October 2009, A4.

46 The Kongsheng Tang is currently involved in a large scholarly task, involving Zhou’s Master Jiang Qing of re-appropriation and adaptation of a number of traditional Confucian rites for a modern age.

47 We mentioned in the first section of this article the power of the *renminbi* as one of the factors contributing to the development of Confucianism in China. Some companies are now largely making an instrumental use of Confucianism in order to serve ultimate economic objectives. The case of the Kongsheng Tang is different and the itinerary of Mr Zhou (almost 8 years spent in the Guizhou mountains studying with his master etc) provides some solid ground to posit that his ultimate goals are not commercial ones.

promote the Confucian Dao in the masses. And they also have some repercussions in the present time. I am now going to introduce the issue of the return in Mainland China of Confucianism-inspired redemptive societies and *jiaohua* agencies.

Redemptive Societies, *Jiaohua* Agencies and the Promotion of a Confucian *Dao* to the Masses

The category of “redemptive societies” is a very recent one, originally coined by Prasenjit Duara and expounded in his work on Manchukuo published in 2003.⁴⁸ It quickly aroused the attention of the scholarly community, giving birth to a research project⁴⁹ and a number of still ongoing discussions. The label originally captures a historical phenomenon. It points to a number of organizations that proliferated in the Republican era, inherited from the syncretistic and millenarian tradition (*san jiao he yi*) of late imperial China and whose aim was both the salvation of the self and the world.⁵⁰ These organizations were extremely diverse and the relevance of such a categorization can certainly be questioned. But it is at least very useful in that it highlights a massive and previously neglected social phenomenon.⁵¹ Palmer explains that redemptive societies “constituted by far the largest group of organized religious congregations in Republican China.”⁵² Most interestingly for us here, he also posits that “in the case of Confucianism, the argument could be made that redemptive societies are the *main* social expression of Confucian revivalism in the 20th century.”⁵³ This assertion and the consideration of a larger time span than the Republican era already bring about the question of whether the label could refer to something more than a historical category. In his work on the Falun Gong, David Ownby chooses to expand the meaning of “redemptive societies”: he encompasses

48 Duara 2003.

49 An ongoing research project on this theme was launched by David Palmer and David Ownby. For a collection of articles emanating from this project, see the forthcoming double thematic issue of *Minsu quyi*, nos. 172–173.

50 Duara 2003, 89–129 and esp. 103. The Chinese expression *jiu shi tuanti* 救世團體 emerged, in the course of the afore-mentioned research project, as a Chinese term translating “redemptive societies”. Among the famous redemptive societies one can mention: the Dao de xueshe 道德學社 (Moral Studies Society), the Tongshanshe 同善社 (Fellowship of Goodness), the Wanguo daode hui 萬國道德會 (Universal morality society), the Dao yuan 道院 (School of the Dao) etc... See Palmer and Goossaert 2011, chapter 4.

51 Palmer 2011. All these points have been discussed in the afore-mentioned article as well as in Palmer and Goossaert 2011, chapter 4; See also Ownby 2008, 23–44.

52 Palmer 2011. Palmer excludes here local communal religion and temple cults, which, though organized, are not voluntary membership associations.

53 Palmer 2011.

therein the qigong and Falun Gong movements, thus ascribing to the label a clearly sociological dimension.⁵⁴ Palmer, in a forthcoming essay, asserts that we need both “different labels for distinct historical waves of groups that have appeared in different circumstances and have their own characteristics” and a more sociological category. He proposes to coin the latter “salvational religion” and lists a number of possible criteria.⁵⁵

Taking into account both the historical and sociological dimensions of the label “redemptive society”, this section focuses on Confucianism by introducing two issues: Firstly, a possible return of historical redemptive societies in the PRC; Secondly, the question of the emergence of new redemptive societies.

As mentioned previously, Republican redemptive societies carried over an ancient syncretism (the *san jiao he yi* that often became a *wu jiao he yi* by adding Christianity and Islam). For some of them, Confucianism was more central than for others. This was for example the case of the Yiguandao 一貫道 or the *Way of Pervading Unity*. This organization is important for our argument in that it developed extremely quickly in Mainland China in the 1930s and the 1940s and attracted a massive following. Violent campaigns to eradicate it in the PRC were launched at the beginning of the 1950s and generally speaking, the organization has always been persecuted in communist China. In Taiwan, it was long forbidden but could however continue its activities in an underground way. 1987 was a watershed for the Yiguandao in that a negotiation with a Kuomintang on the lookout for supports on the road to Taiwan’s democratization led to a legalization of this “new religion”.⁵⁶ Since then, it has developed quickly and has become the third largest religion in Taiwan, expanding also quickly its activities overseas.

The Confucian identity of the Yiguandao is deeply anchored into history but has also been evolving with time.⁵⁷ From the perspective of social history, the modern Yiguandao inherited at the end of the empire from another sectarian tradition,

54 Ownby 2008, 26–27.

55 Palmer 2011.

56 On the process of legalization see the brochure recently published and distributed by the *Yiguandao zonghui* entitled *Yiguandao hefabhua guocheng* 一貫道合法化過程 (the process of legalization of the Yiguandao). Giving here a few elements on the Confucian identity of the Yiguandao just introduces briefly part of the overall picture. I am not intending at all to play down other pivotal elements in the ideology of this religion that might be borrowed from Buddhism (Maitreya and Jigong huofu are key figures of the Yiguandao) or Daoism. I am just focusing on the Confucian identity of the movement for the sake of the overall arguments introduced in that paper.

57 On the history of the movement, among many works see Song 1996; Jordan and Overmeyer 1986; Irons 2000; Lin 2007; Lu 2008.

the Xiantiandao 先天道,⁵⁸ that originally attracted a population of small local scholar-officials largely sharing Confucian values. Moreover, these scholar-officials were often participating to activities (e. g., spirit writing sessions) in phoenix halls (*luantang* 鸞堂) that have also been described as another form of “popular Confucianism” and that originally provided some institutional foundations for the development of the Yiguandao.⁵⁹ From the perspective of intellectual history, “popular (*minjian* 民間) Confucianism” referred extensively to the mainstream (*zhulin* 主流, i. e. scholarly, especially Song Ming *lixue* 宋明理學) Confucian tradition. The work of Zhong Yunying (Chung Yun-Ying) provides some detailed analysis about how a number of theories on heart/mind (*xin* 心), principle (*li* 理) or energy (*qi* 氣) were reinterpreted by the Xiantiandao and later by the Yiguandao as self-cultivation resources.⁶⁰ If we look at the evolution of this Confucian identity with time it is maybe convenient to distinguish 3 phases. Firstly, the action of the 15th patriarch Wang Jueyi 王覺一 (1821–1884) was ideologically pivotal in designing the ideology of the sect, influenced by Song and Ming Confucianism and carried out in the name of an “authentic Confucianism” (*zhen ru* 真儒).⁶¹ Secondly, Zhang Jianran 張天然 (1889–1947) – who represents with his wife the latest generation of patriarchs of the movement – deeply reformed the organization that quickly expanded afterwards (especially in the 1930s and 1940s). He asserted that the foundations of Yiguandao were Confucian thought and rituals and that its mission was (on this basis) to save the world.⁶² Thirdly and more recently, Yiguandao also underwent profound changes. Christian Jochim evokes, along with legalization, “Confucianization” of the movement as one of its key developments for the period 1981–1995.⁶³ This “Confucianization”, characterized by an increased emphasis on texts as a basis of self-cultivation (in place, to some extent, of spirit writing) and by the increased promotion of Confucian virtues in societies is, I believe, still ongoing.⁶⁴

58 In 1886, Liu Qinxu 劉清虛 became patriarch of one Xiantiandao branch and it is around that period of time that the sect is said to have adopted a new name, explicitly referring to the *Analects* of Confucius (4:15): the Way of pervading unity (Yiguandao).

59 Song 1996, vol. 2, 312–313. See also Clart 1997 and 2003.

60 See, for example, Zhong 2008.

61 Irons 2000, 142. Li 2009, 4. See also Wang Jueyi’s writings published under the name “Beihai laoren”: Lin 2008.

62 Song 1996, 49–50.

63 Jochim 2009, 88.

64 Jochim (2009, 88) explains cautiously that his interpretation of the Yiguandao and its Confucianization “is quite possibly one current in only certain branches”. It is true that the Yiguandao, in spite of its efforts to structure itself as a new religion is constituted of a number of branches whose ideology and practices may vary to a significant extent. If we take the example of spirits writing practices, there maybe important differences from

The first reason why Yiguandao is interesting in the framework of a discussion on Confucianism in the PRC today is that it offers a striking comparative perspective. I emphasized in the first section of this paper that the so-called “Confucian revival” in Mainland China consisted at the moment (i. e., during the 2000s) of a patchwork of ill-structured and scattered initiatives taking place everywhere across the country. I can add here that these initiatives often share a lot with the ones carried out in an increasingly “confucianized” Yiguandao. The most blatant example is the “Classics reading movement” that developed massively in the PRC in the past years involving millions of children and their families.⁶⁵ The movement is not unified and includes a number of very different approaches. However, we have something that directly echoes one of the main practices now currently carried out in a very large number of Yiguandao’s Fotang (places of worship).⁶⁶ Furthermore, one could also emphasize that Confucian scholar and activist Wang Caigui (a Taiwanese disciple of the well-known Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan) who was instrumental in convincing the Yiguandao to promote Classics reading for the children – although Wang is not himself a Yiguandao member but what we could term a “pure” Confucian – is also a key source of inspiration behind the movement developing in the PRC.⁶⁷ Apart from the reading of Classics by children, a number of new Confucian practices burgeoning in Mainland China also resonate with key features of the Yiguandao. The 2008 ceremony to honour Confucius in Taipei’s Confucius temple – attended by key personalities of the regime including Ma Ying-jeou in a way that reminds of similar ceremonies carried out in the Mainland (for example in Qufu) – was also supported by the Yiguandao.⁶⁸ The revival of a *rushang* ideal in the PRC (and the associated development of *guoxue* classes for entrepreneurs) could also be compared to the close association between the Yiguandao and the business community. Examples could be easily multiplied. To some extent, the Yiguandao offers an example – but of course not the only one – of how these scat-

branch to branch. For example, Baoguang chongzheng 寶光崇正 would still be often carrying out spirit writing activities whereas they would be much more occasional for Baoguang chongde 寶光健德. Jichu zhongshu 基礎忠恕 would have totally stopped spirit writing activities in the 1990s. Interviews, Taipei, February 2010.

65 It is difficult to have figures on the movement. I have asked the question almost everywhere and activists usually mention figures that are between 10 million and 100 million children (10–20 million are figures often quoted). All this needs of course to be taken cautiously.

66 On this topic see Billioud 2011b.

67 I could observe this through numerous field surveys in different parts of China over the past years.

68 Field observation, Taipei, 2008. On the return of ceremonies to honour Confucius in the PRC, see Billioud and Thoraval 2009b.

tered and burgeoning practices carried out in the Mainland could be integrated if they could be provided a unifying ideology, which is not the case so far. In any case, the PRC's "Confucian revival" offers an extremely favourable ground for the return of "redemptive societies", be this category considered in a historical way (I am alluding here to ancient redemptive societies even if they have transformed themselves with time) or in a sociological one with the emergence of new organizations.

The related question is the one of a possible return of the Yiguandao in Mainland China. To some extent, it is likely that there are already some activities carried out in the PRC. However these activities are probably more associated with individual initiatives within certain branches or Fotang than anything really articulated or centrally monitored. The Yiguandao General Association (*Yiguandao zonghui* 一貫道總會), created after the legalization of the movement and eager to promote it on the Mainland, has in fact rather chosen to engage in an open dialogue with the PRC's religious authorities. Delegations already went to Beijing for talks, while, at the same time mediations probably also took place on the political front. In August 2009, a delegation of scholars from the Mainland accompanied by officials from the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) constituted a delegation – the first ever – to tour the main Taiwanese Fotang and meet with the leaders of the organization. On the side of the Yiguandao, the objective was largely to show that the reality of the organization has nothing to do with the usual caricature of reactionary *huidaomen* 反動會道門 presented by the PRC's propaganda apparatus and that it is a transparent, responsible, law-abiding organization with positive contributions to society (education and morals, relief operations, care of the elderly, culture, etc.) and to social order and stability in general. By the same token, this delegation also provided an opportunity to emphasize the Yiguandao's opposition to Taiwanese independence and a commonality of values between the two shores (Confucianism played in that respect a central role). On the side of the PRC authorities, this survey of the Yiguandao needs to be put within the context of an evolving religious policy that is increasingly taking into account the expansion of religiosity beyond the sphere of the 5 officially recognized religions. In 2005, a new division was created within SARA in order to take into account both "popular faith" (*minjian xinyang* 民間信仰) and "new religions" (*xinxing zongjiao* 新興宗教) and the director of this division actually both attended the delegation with the Yiguandao and the ceremonies to honour Confucius carried out by the Kongsheng Tang in Shenzhen, some good evidence that religious authorities are keeping a close track of the various activities somehow associated with Confucianism.⁶⁹ The way will probably still be quite long for the Yiguandao before it manages to be legalized

69 On the evolution of the religious policy, see Palmer 2009b.

again in the PRC but a better knowledge of the organization is at least a necessary prerequisite to any potential move.

The Yiguandao provides an example of how Confucian virtues may be propagated into the masses through a religious organization. It also shows the case of a *historical* redemptive society expanding quickly in modern societies. If we focus now more on “redemptive societies” as a sociological category, one can wonder to which extent new organizations might develop in the PRC and contribute to structuring a Confucianism-inspired revival.

The Beijing based Yidan xuetang 一耽學堂 is an example of an organization that can probably be considered a new redemptive society in the PRC.⁷⁰ It is not a religious society per se, but rather a *jiaohua* organization promoting actively self-cultivation in the masses. Created at the beginning of the 2000s by Pang Fei 逢飛, a young graduate from Beijing University, it now claims several thousand volunteers, hundreds of thousands of occasional participants and activities carried out across the country. The core of its activities are sessions of morning Classics reading that usually take place in parks. Texts are more often than not Confucian Classics like the *Analects*, the *Great Learning* or the *Zhongyong*. Moreover, the Yidan xuetang also carries out rituals to honour Confucius, be it in the modest premises of the organization in Beijing or in Confucian temples. This being said, the society is not uniquely dedicated to the propagation of a Confucian Dao and it embraces more largely *guoxue* or national studies, a category that also encompasses other spiritual traditions. On the top of its Classics reading and ritual activities, the Yidan xuetang also begins to develop some charitable work and some of the volunteers participated for instance to the relief efforts at the time of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. So far, the authorities have maintained some sort of “neutral position” towards the society, neither encouraging it nor forbidding it (Pang Fei for example regularly appears in the media and sometimes in TV shows). The organization, on its side, carries out a policy of total transparency about its activities (in a way, it is largely a “transparent society” as opposed to a secret one) and claims both its allegiance to the politics of the authorities and its will to contribute, through *jiaohua* and a renaissance of the individual, to a larger renaissance of the Chinese nation. Although it does not maintain any link with historical redemptive societies and even strongly refuses any association with “weird practices” of the “*huidaomen*”, the Yidan xuetang disseminates the writings of a figure active in Republican China and associated with the Universal Morality Society (Wanguo daodehui), the legendary Wang Fengyi 王鳳儀, whose action had an important impact especially in Manchuria at the time.⁷¹ The 2000s have been a phase of creation and positioning of the societies’

70 All the points briefly exposed in this paragraph are developed in Billioud 2011a.

71 The case of Wang Fengyi is discussed in Billioud 2011a. See also Song 2002, 215–239.

activities and of training of a core group of volunteers, thus paving the way for a future expansion. The coming years should tell whether the society manages to consolidate its (starting) nationwide development and transform itself in a way that might translate, in the longer run and provided that the political situation makes it possible, into a larger-scale organization reminiscent, in terms of influence, of the redemptive societies of the Republican era.

Concluding Remarks

The beginning of the new decade might well be, at least to some extent, a turning point for the so-called “Confucian revival” in the PRC. Whereas the reference to Confucianism reappeared during the 2000s in society (which is already a significant change with the situation prevailing in the 1990s when the *guoxue* fever was mainly an academic phenomenon), it however remained a largely scattered, ill-defined and non-integrated phenomenon encompassing completely different realities. There is little doubt that these burgeoning, popular and non structured activities will continue (some short-term crazes will die out, new cases will appear) since they basically reflect a deep need of re-appropriating and reinventing elements of the past considered valuable in a number of different, though often intertwined realms, from self-cultivation to education, family and social organization, religion, politics etc. However, some activists now want to go further and dream of structuring a real social movement. Some examples have been provided in this paper of the forms that such a movement could take in the “religious” and *jiaohua* realms but they are by no means the only ones. The attitude of the authorities will of course be a crucial factor in the possible emergence of larger-scale organizations and in the definition of the type of “Confucian NGOs” authorized. Negotiating properly their role with the Party-State (both at the local and central levels) will be of utmost importance for these organizations. Moreover, if Confucian societies manage to develop in the years ahead, we will also probably observe some profound differences between them. The frequently encountered expression of a “Confucian revival” is indeed very problematic: not only does it point today to very different social phenomena, but it also artificially gives the impression of a community of worldviews among Confucian activists and sympathizers. Needless to insist here on the complex history of Confucianism in China (both as a thought and as a body of practices and institutions) and on the plurality of opinions that it enables. Besides, the attitude towards Western-inspired modernity may vary considerably among contemporary Confucians, be they scholars or *minjian* activists. In brief, they are some grounds to assume that the efforts to re-institutionalize Confucianism in novel ways might translate in the years ahead into very different and competing projects. The road towards a great unity will certainly still be a very long one.

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